The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age

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INTRODUCTION

The philosopher Simone Weil, born in France in 1909 to Jewish but secular parents, succumbed to her initial mystical experience in Santa Maria degli Angeli, a twelfth-century Romanesque chapel in Assisi once frequented by Saint Francis. “Something stronger than I was,” Weil later wrote, “compelled me for the first time in my life to go down on my knees.” An ardently political thinker with Trotskyist sympathies—Lev Bronstein at one point stayed with her family—Weil was known for both an ascetic leftism and a fervidly Catholic piety. The combination inspired peers at the École Normale Supérieure to give her a vicious sobriquet: “the Red Virgin.” An early pacifist, by 1939 Weil condemned her non-violent period as “mon erreur criminelle,” and in exile, first in New York and then London, she became an outspoken essayist for the Free French. Throughout her life she was passionate in spirit but precariously frail in body. By 1943 her acts of stringent self-privation brought her to the Middlesex hospital, where she died of heart failure at the age of only 34.

The example of Simone Weil came to mind when reading Charles Taylor’s monumental new book, A Secular Age.1 Perhaps this was due to the fact that Weil, though by origin a secular Jew, opened her soul to a highly

reflective, politically progressive, and philosophically articulate strain of Catholicism not unlike the sort Taylor seeks to defend in his book. Weil herself remained critical of the Church as a political institution. She even refused communion, preferring instead an anomic spirituality modeled upon Saint Francis and the long tradition of Catholic mysticism. Taylor, too, is noticeably bitter regarding the less progressive aspects of the modern Church. In a work otherwise noteworthy for its restraint and a generous acknowledgement of the varieties of religious expression, the angriest passages concern Roman Catholicism’s retreat from the promises of Vatican II. Taylor is also critical of the Church for its ambivalence concerning the facts of human sexuality. He grants that asceticism and priestly celibacy may have a place for some believers but he is worried at official Catholic policies that betray an unrealistic denial of the body and a drive toward “excarnation.” On this theme he is worlds apart from Weil, whose habits of self-mortification were extreme and proved ultimately fatal. But it is a central lesson of Taylor’s book that there are multiple paths to God. Again and again he admonishes us to remain open toward the varieties of religious transcendence. Taylor therefore ranks alongside Weil within a tradition of religiously and politically progressive Catholic philosophy. Admittedly, this tradition no longer has the strength it once did. In the swelling chorus of intellectuals who advocate a greater place for religion within the secular world, very few, whatever their creed, speak in tones so measured and humane.

But there is a further reason that Weil’s example may prove instructive. This has to do with the especially unorthodox character of her convictions, best captured in a remark from the anthology of her writings, Waiting for God: “Attentiveness without an object is prayer in its supreme form.” Like many theological aphorisms, the phrase embodies a paradox. After all, doesn’t religious prayer necessarily have some object, some purpose? Doesn’t one have to pray to some thing, some One? Perhaps so, perhaps not. As Tertullian is (falsely) remembered as saying: Credo quia absurdum est. The notion of prayer without an object may serve here as an introduction to my comments. At the end of this review, I will come back to this idea so as to explain why, notwithstanding my deep admiration for Taylor’s book, I must confess to a certain perplexity regarding some of its premises and implications.²

²I owe an enormous debt to three Harvard colleagues, Sean Kelly, James Kloppenberg, and Michael Sandel, for our reading group during a snow-heavy January in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I also received many suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper from Warren Breckman, Ludmila Guenova, Sean Kelly, James Kloppenberg, Benjamin Lazier,
TAYLOR’S PREVIOUS WORK

The publication of Taylor’s new book is in itself an event of immense importance for intellectual historians, philosophers, and social theorists, as it represents a culmination to more than forty years’ philosophical labor. Beginning with his *The Explanation of Behavior* in 1964, he has developed a theory of practice rooted in the phenomenological tradition of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty that emphasizes the sense-directedness or intentionality of human action. Drawn most of all to German canons of hermeneutic and historicist philosophy, Taylor has grown ever bolder in his arguments against behavioralist and rational-choice models of explanation, insofar as these presuppose what he considers a formalistic and culturally impoverished model of selfhood he calls “disengaged agency.”

Taylor’s classic 1975 text, *Hegel, An Exposition*, broke through decades of anti-Hegelian prejudice in the English-speaking world by providing an historically faithful yet rationally intelligible reconstruction of Hegel’s philosophy. The animating claim of the book was that Hegel’s model of Spirit, borrowing upon concepts from Herder and the *Sturm und Drang* movement, exhibited a certain dynamic of self-realization through externalization which Taylor termed “expressivism” (a phrase he took from his teacher Isaiah Berlin). The expressivist self was not fully formed and ontologically independent of its surroundings, it was rather dependent upon its actions and articulations to realize what it was. The subject, individual or collective, was of necessity embodied in certain historical and cultural contexts, and it achieved self-consciousness and self-satisfaction as a free agency only insofar as it came to recognize itself in a world after its own image. Taylor’s model of subjectivity in the Hegel-book drew upon a variety of resources, especially the cardinal insight of existential phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty that the essence of selfhood is a practical and historically situated *being-in-the-world*: perceptual knowledge cannot be understood within the confines of the post-Cartesian tradi-
tion of epistemology, since our experiences of both the world and ourselves are irrevocably constituted through language, social institutions, and the body (all claims, one should note, that resonate deeply with Catholic doctrine concerning both the ecclesia and the body of Christ).7

The phenomenological model of embodied and situated subjectivity provided a founding premise for Taylor’s 1989 Sources of the Self, a masterpiece of historical and philosophical reconstruction that investigated the various conceptions of selfhood from Plato to the present-day, with sustained attention to Descartes, Locke, and other exponents of modern subjectivity.8 Building upon a familiar Heideggerian complaint against the predominance of Cartesian disengagement in modern epistemology and social theory, a key message of the book was that Locke and other Anglo-Saxon theorists had taken a fallacious turn insofar as they conceived the self to be “punctual,” that is, atomistic, individualistic, and only contingently bound to its cultural or historical surroundings.9 Notwithstanding its rigorously impartial tone and the prodigious erudition displayed on every page, Sources was obviously driven by powerful philosophical convictions, and in the closing pages it was no less obvious that Taylor was laying the groundwork for commitments of a robustly religious character. Against the apparent dissatisfactions of the punctual self, Taylor proposed that we moderns might draw greater normative guidance from the strong spiritual framework of what he called “Judaeo-Christian theism,” the implication being that without such a framework we were likely to suffer dissociation, disorientation, and anomie.

The argument in favor of something like a spiritual framework and against the dissatisfactions of post-Cartesian or “punctual” selfhood has grown increasingly vivid in Taylor’s more recent publications over the last ten years. The spiritual animus was clearly at work in both A Catholic Modernity?10 and Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited.11

9 See Taylor, Sources of the Self; for a very different treatment see Jerrold Seigel, The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe Since the Seventeenth Century (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
But it is only with *A Secular Age* that Taylor has assumed a fully unapologetic voice. Here he speaks not merely as a modern philosopher who happens to be Catholic, but a truly Catholic philosopher for modernity. For those of us who have greatly admired Taylor for his philosophical labors but who understood him to be a philosopher *simpliciter* without paying attention to his confessional commitments, the religious or apologetic purposes that quicken *A Secular Age* may come as a surprise. But it is crucial that one take note of the book’s unabashedly confessional character, since the very coherence of the book and the legitimacy of its argument depend upon a quite specific conception of religion. To see why this is so will demand a careful reconstruction of its claims.

**SECULARIZATION WITHOUT SUBTRACTION**

*A Secular Age* belongs to a long tradition of ambitious efforts by philosophers of history and social theorists to assess both the process and the significance of secularization in the modern West. The important precedents include: Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Löwith, Blumenberg, and, most recently, Marcel Gauchet, whose *The Disenchantment of the World* was published in French in 1985 and in English in 1997 with a critical foreword by Taylor himself. What distinguishes Taylor from most of his antecedents is that he rejects what he calls the “subtraction thesis.” This is the claim that in the modern West human experience has been stripped of its mystifying veils, typified in Marx and Engels’s famous description concerning the effects of capitalism: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.” This view counts as subtractive because it implies that when the West dispensed with traditional notions of the sacred it underwent a process of metaphysical education concerning the true nature of things. Capitalism on this view brings not a mere transformation but a genuine *metanoia*—a turning from illusion to reality—that leaves us to confront only the terminal obfuscations of bourgeois ideology, which are themselves fated to disappear.

More important than Marxism for Taylor is that other, more pessimis-

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tic narrative of subtraction, memorably described by Max Weber in his 1919 speech, “Wissenschaft als Beruf,” as the disenchantment of the world. One typically thinks of Weber as a theorist of instrumental reason. But Weber notes that the West’s long process of “intellectualization and rationalization” has not necessarily brought an “increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives.” After all, he writes, the “American Indian” or the “Hottentot” knows more about his tools than most of us know about the streetcars we ride every day. Rationalization instead means “the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one could learn it at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted.”

The process can aptly be termed subtraction—Weber’s German word, Entzauberung, is negative—insofar as the rise of instrumental rationality necessarily means a loss of commonly shared value-orientations: “Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations.” Weber saw this process of disenchantment as nearly irresistible, and to those who still felt the need for religion, he offered grim counsel:

To the person who cannot bear the fate of the times, one must say: may he rather return silently, without the usual publicity build-up of renegades, but simply and plainly. The arms of the old churches are opened widely and compassionately for him. After all, they do not make it hard for him. One way or another he has to bring his “intellectual sacrifice”—that is inevitable.

The message was condescending: the modern condition of value-relativity was no doubt difficult to bear. Although Weber reserved a certain admiration for those who could still sustain unconditional value-commitments, he clearly saw the religious man’s sacrificio dell’ intelletto as a retreat from the hard truths of the age. Facing up to the loss of the gods was only for the strong.

Taylor’s chief complaint against the subtraction thesis seems to be that

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Marxians and Weberians alike think that religion is no longer compatible with what we moderns now recognize as the truth of the human condition, and so it follows that religion must be either a mystification or a failure of nerve. But this is to predecide the question as to whether religion itself is valid. The subtractionists tell us that as moderns they know the real components of human experience, and the story they tell about the falling away of erstwhile belief is designed to hand them their own credentials: it tells them historically how they progressed from past ignorance and how they arrived at their privileged position of metaphysical insight. In this sense the subtraction thesis presumes what it sets out to prove. Taylor obviously rejects this self-credentializing view and he wants us to consider the possibility that religious beliefs might still have merit. Indeed, it is an important premise of his argument that certain types of experience actually bear witness to this possibility. His book begins with an account from the autobiography of the Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths (1906–93) describing an early experience of religious epiphany:

A lark rose suddenly from the ground behind the tree where I was standing and poured out its song above my head, and then sank still singing to rest. Everything then grew still as the sunset faded and the veil of dusk began to cover the earth. I remember now the feeling of awe which came over me. I felt inclined to kneel on the ground, as though I had been standing in the presence of an angel; and I hardly dared to look on the face of the sky, because it seemed as through it was but a veil before the face of God.

This is undeniably a beautiful passage, and Taylor is convinced that we have to tell the story secularization in such a way that it can account for the possibility of an experience which has this sort of grandeur and depth. More precisely, Taylor wants to remain faithful to the actual phenomenology of such an experience, the way it simply shows itself to be before we start trying to explain it away. But the subtractionist view just cannot account for such an epiphany on its own terms.

Taylor’s own definition of the secular age is rather different. What most interests him about the shift to secularity is “a move from a society in which belief in God is unchallenged and indeed unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest

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16 The objection is stated with greater clarity in Taylor, Varieties of Religion Today, 41.
Religion used to be a default but is now a choice. This definition bears some resemblance to the Weberian view insofar as Weber, too, believed that the process of modernization involved the breakdown of holistic belief systems and their replacement by plural value-spheres no one of which enjoyed a default or unquestioned legitimacy. But there is a crucial difference: Weber further believed that value-relativity was the only truth of things in the special sense that if one could tear away the subjective values imposed upon the world we would discover that the world in itself was meaningless. It is this implicitly metaphysical premise that Taylor refuses to accept. An operative assumption throughout the book is that those who deny religion are missing something, and that, even if they do not recognize it themselves, their lives are lacking in a certain fullness, an awareness of higher meaning or dimensionality. If there is a metaphysical premise to Taylor’s argument it is that religion cannot be explained (pace Weber) as merely a pre-modern and dispensable structure of social cohesion because it actually does put human beings in touch with something transcendent, though Taylor is also careful to note that those who do not consider themselves believers may deny their need for that transcendence at all:

The change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others. I may find it inconceivable that I would abandon my faith, but there are others, including possibly some very close to me, whose way of living I cannot in all honestly just dismiss as depraved, or blind, or unworthy, who have no faith (at least not in God, or the transcendent). Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. And this will also likely mean that at least in certain milieux, it may be hard to sustain one’s faith. There will be people who feel bound to give it up, even though they mourn its loss.¹⁹

On Taylor’s view, it is a defining feature of the modern condition that many different and at times mutually exclusive forms of life are now on offer such that no single one of them presents itself as the axiomatic or default way to live. Religious belief was once a social necessity, or, even more strongly put,

¹⁸ SA, 3.
¹⁹ Ibid.
it was part of what it was to be a human being. Today, by contrast, religious belief is a social contingency.

While this is surely an important observation, it tells us very little about possible changes in the phenomenology of belief itself. If the typical modern believer (and perhaps Taylor himself) truly finds the possibility of his own disbelief “inconceivable,” then that belief is not optional at all. But then modern belief in this sense seems no less “axiomatic” than pre-modern belief. It is a pity that Taylor does not address this issue. One might have thought that the most typical religious sentiments amongst twenty-first-century moderns are not those they believe either entirely or not at all, but are rather those that leave them with a sense of muddle, such that they cannot fully inhabit their own convictions whatever they happen to be. Of course a considerable number of people are indeed strict theists or strict atheists, and Taylor has much to say about why the polarization of opinion between these two groups is a bad thing. But this makes it all the more surprising that his portrait of the modern condition does not leave room for the muddled majority. In North America, a great many people seem no longer at ease in the full-dress garments of religious commitment. But neither can they cast them aside. They sustain instead what might be called an “ironist’s faith,” the divided consciousness of simultaneously believing and not believing, and they are keenly aware that the beliefs they do hold are not merely an historical but also a psychological contingency.

In his earlier lectures, Varieties of Religion Today, Taylor characterized William James as the prototypical modern believer who felt himself always on the “cusp” between belief and disbelief. But A Secular Age makes little room for irony of this sort. When Taylor observes that belief is now an “option” he does not mean that individual believers experience their own faith with a modernist’s vertiginous sense of contingency or value-relativity (an experience that in Peter Berger’s view makes “heretics” of us all, whatever our religious convictions). He means only that our social world is now sufficiently pluralistic about faith-commitments that as a society we longer regard religion as providing us with the default normative foundations for all collective action. In its bare outlines this argument is not altogether new. It recalls the great Annales historian Lucien Febvre’s claim that “unbelief” in the pre-modern world was a virtual impossibility. But histo-

20 Varieties, esp. 57–59.
rians of the ancient world might also object that Taylor’s before-and-after narrative overstates the necessitarian character of pre-modern religion. After all, even Augustine of Hippo in fifth-century North Africa (hardly a heretic) passed through various convictions and only came to Christianity after sincere experimentation with other frameworks of belief.23 So what does Taylor mean by the claim that at some earlier point it was “virtually impossible not to believe in God”? Although his image of an integrated Christianity depends upon a certain conception of the medieval world, it should be obvious that his argument is not primarily historical, and those who raise objections concerning details of the historical record are missing its deeper import. For Taylor’s is ultimately a philosophical argument about the way history conditions our beliefs. To appreciate the full force of its claims we need to delve more deeply into some of its philosophical premises.

THE IDEA OF A BACKGROUND

All beliefs, writes Taylor, “are held within a context or framework of the taken-for-granted, which usually remains tacit, and may even be as yet unacknowledged by the agent, because never formulated.”24 This notion of a framework of tacit belief is borrowed from phenomenologists (such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Hubert Dreyfus, and Taylor himself) who have contributed to current theories concerning what is termed the “background” of human understanding.25 Heidegger described this as the Umwelt or “surrounding-world” of human action and he urged us to see that our very sense of ourselves as agents presupposes a shared context of significance. Our being-in-the-world is thus incorrigibly both social and practical (claims that derive from Heidegger’s analyses of Mitsein, or being-with, and Zuhandenheit, the readiness-to-hand of publicly accessible tools). Because we are invested in the way things turn out for us in our lives our background also consists in a thick sediment of evaluations and social

24 SA, 13.
norms (hence Heidegger’s famous claim that being-in-the-world is essentially a structure of “Sorge,” or care). Now it is a vital lesson of existential phenomenology that most of these evaluations are not even formulated as beliefs. They just show up in the way we do things, the way we carry on in our daily affairs. For Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty and for Taylor too, practices *embody* beliefs and interpretations. It is this holistic network of practices that precedes and first makes possible both our consciousness of and our engagement with the world. We can, of course, make some number of these interpretations explicit, say, by focusing our attention upon them, or by subjecting them to rational scrutiny. But to do so we must rely upon further interpretations since a shared context of significance is a *precondition* for understanding at all.

The concept of a background has many important antecedents in the history of ideas. Taylor himself has noted elsewhere that the notion of a background was anticipated in Wittgenstein’s arguments against private language and the scattered remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations* that meaning is always conditional upon a form of life.26 But it remained to phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty to show that the background of human understanding consists not primarily in concepts but in various modes of *embodied* intentionality, such as concrete social practices and publicly accessible language. On the phenomenologist’s view, the liberal-atomist picture of the human being as isolable from her culture or history is not merely politically wrong-headed, it also presupposes a fantastical sort of independence that human beings can never hope to achieve. As Taylor explains: “We are in fact all acting, thinking, and feeling out of backgrounds and frameworks which we do not fully understand. To ascribe total personal responsibility to us for these is to want to leap out of the human condition.”27

Now a crucial premise of the phenomenological idea of a background is that it is given to us *historically*. A background is not fixed by God or reason, it is culturally and temporally finite, a shared but limited horizon of assumptions. But it is nonetheless authoritative within certain historical limits, and it determines what can show up as significant or what counts as possible for any given culture and epoch. Heidegger had this historical-ontological function in mind when he wrote that “metaphysics grounds an

27 SA, 387.
And Michel Foucault borrowed from phenomenology to develop his own theory of history as a series of broad-scale epochal shifts in discursive and social practices.\textsuperscript{29}

To understand Taylor’s historical narrative it is important to see how deeply it remains indebted to yet also transforms the phenomenological idea of a background. The debt is most evident when we are introduced the notion of a “social imaginary,” which is defined as “that common understanding which makes possible common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.” A social imaginary is thus far more than a mere theory of the social world. It is rather the concatenation of tacit beliefs and expectations held not necessarily by philosophers but “ordinary people,” and it is articulated not in “theoretical terms” but instead through “images, stories, legends, etc.”\textsuperscript{30} Taylor’s point is that the story of secularization should not be told as primarily a shift in theories or doctrines (though he does think these theories matter a great deal). To be religious or secular is to live one’s life in the company of other human beings within a fabric of social practices that embody a taken-for-granted “image” of our common world. And because religious beliefs are built into a whole network of social assumptions, the gradual shift from religious to secular society is accompanied by a large-scale shift in those very same social practices. The rise of secular consciousness in the modern West can be understood only within a much broader narrative concerning the socio-cultural and institutional transformation of our world and the social imaginary by which we picture it to ourselves.

**HEGELIAN VARIATIONS ON A RELIGIOUS THEME**

There is nothing modest about this ambition. The transformation of the social imaginary that Taylor wants to describe occurred very slowly over the span of nearly a millennium, beginning as early as the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, and even before that at the very dawn of the world religions in the period (\textit{circa} 800–200 BCE) Karl Jaspers called the “Axial


\textsuperscript{30} SA, 171–72.
Age.” The shape of this story is broadly Hegelian, full of what Taylor calls “zig-zags” and ironies and unintended consequences. Not surprisingly, the monumental sweep of Taylor’s narrative requires that he place greater emphasis upon certain moments while eclipsing others or omitting them altogether. Because he is interested chiefly with the phenomenon of secularization in Western Europe, Taylor has virtually nothing to say about the complex and variegated history of Eastern Orthodoxy in all its national forms. Neither does he concern himself with the presence of minority religions in the West. The Jews (who have famously or sometimes notoriously figured in some historical narratives as the vanguard of social modernity) hardly appear at all. They serve only to inaugurate the ancient breakthrough to “monotheism” after which they remain more or less passive recipients of the changes wrought by their Christian neighbors. Nor does Islam play a role of any significance, though one might argue that European history should include both Al Andalus (the Islamic civilization of the Iberian peninsula before the Catholic Reconquista) and the Ottoman Empire, the massive and polyglot Behemoth which reached at its zenith almost to the gates of Vienna. The civilization that interests Taylor is “Latin Christendom.” He acknowledges its internal differentiation but he seems to feel its metamorphosis can be told largely on its own terms and without reference to other peoples and civilizations either within or without. This monocultural emphasis distinguishes Taylor from both Durkheim and Weber, both of whom sustained a boldly comparitivist perspective on the sociology of religion. The exclusive focus on Latin Christendom is not in itself objectionable, though it may tempt some readers to conclude that for Taylor the only genuine experience of the sacred is the experience of the Christian God (a problem I shall revisit later). It is nonetheless clear that Taylor is sympathetic to the ideal of an elastic Christian culture that remains open to its others and embraces multiform types of Christian religious commitment. In fact, it is one of his chief regrets that with the transformation of Western European Christianity over the past five hundred years much of its former elasticity has been lost.

The basic transformation of Western European Christianity as Taylor

32 SA, 95.
33 SA, 771.
describes it begins more or less in the late-medieval and early-modern period (from approximately the tenth to fifteenth centuries), in a society of pluralistic and highly differentiated religious practice. This is an “enchanted world,” a world brimming over with spirits and demons, in which “moral forces” are felt to be embedded in the lived environment.³⁴ The metaphysical picture, supported by both Aristotle and popular belief, implies that religious meaning is not merely “in the mind” but is actually “out there.” An inhabitant of this universe can point to experiences confirming that even the most everyday objects are “charged” with supernatural power.³⁵ Because the environment is populated with forces that can penetrate one’s soul, whether by demonic possession or the Holy Spirit, one cannot experience one’s selfhood as ontologically distinct or walled-off from its surroundings. The self is instead “vulnerable” and “porous.”³⁶

In this religious cosmos God and society are intertwined. From the local parish to the universal Church one feels oneself to be embedded within a complex web of personal, economic, and politico-ecclesiastical arrangements all of which conspire to reinforce the sense that society itself is the locus of divine power. The social bond is sacred. But these arrangements exhibit tremendous variation. The celibate clergy “prays and fulfills priestly and pastoral functions for a married laity, which in turn supports the clergy. On a broader scale, monks pray for all, mendicant orders preach; others provide alms, hospitals, etc. Over time, the tension is overlaid with an equilibrium, based on a complementarity of functions.”³⁷

For Taylor the millennium-long emergence of the secular world over the past millennium has involved the gradual breakdown of this integrated religious society and the rise of a new social imaginary in which human beings no longer conceive of themselves as necessarily embedded within a holistic network of institutions and belief. This transformation was manifold and its preparation required hundreds of years. An important step was the emphasis on discipline and uniformity of religious practice, signaled early on by the decision of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 that imposed a universal requirement of auricular confession upon the entire laity. Along with this came greater rigor in the training of priests and the proliferation of teaching manuals for clerical instruction, all efforts which typified the drive toward orthopraxis that culminated in the age of Reform. The

³⁴ SA, 31–32.
³⁵ SA, 35.
³⁶ Ibid.
³⁷ SA, 44.
irony is that this greater intensity of religious devotion proved to be an important step toward the dissolution of traditional religion: by imposing new and more homogenous modes of belief the Church weakened the older structures of social complementarity and helped lay the foundations for a modern and more undifferentiated society in which social and sacred bonds no longer functioned in concert. By the time of the Reformation it was possible to conceive a robust distinction between one’s commitments to society and to God.

The creation of a “disciplinary society” was a complex and ramified process without a single causal origin. But the reader may be forgiven for thinking that at times Taylor betrays a certain Catholic-minded resentment toward the innovations of Protestant culture: Calvin and Locke receive stern treatment, and at various points in the book the term “Reform” seems to swell in meaning until it embraces all the misfortunes of early modern Europe. But this would be to misunderstand Taylor’s transconfessional thesis. He is careful to note that the very same patterns of reformist discipline emerged in Catholic lands as well. The neo-Stoic writer Justus Lipsius, for example, laid down theories of professional statecraft and self-control that would inspire notables of every faith, Calvinist, Lutheran, and Catholic. Nor was the transformation merely social; it also drew justification from the innermost resources of Christian theology. A crucial step was the debate between realists and nominalists concerning God Himself: the medieval conception of God was joined to an Aristotelian-realist doctrine concerning the perfections inherent in all things. Occam chafed at this realist view because it implied that God was constrained to will only what was by nature good. A truly sovereign God should have the capacity to determine what was good through His own will. Henceforth there could be no intrinsic kinds independent of His calling them into being. Occam meant to magnify God, but again Taylor detects an ironic consequence: the victory of nominalism over realism introduced a bold metaphysical distinction between an unconditioned agency and an undifferentiated cosmos linked only by instrumental reason. Theology itself therefore played an important role in the disenchantment of nature and by so doing widened the chasm between religion and everyday life.

With the rise of the disciplinary society Taylor also sees a change in the very conception of human being. The older conception of the self as embedded in a holistic but differentiated natural-social-theological order slowly gave way to a “disembedded” selfhood understood to be ontologically prior to and independent of its surroundings. The realist conception of the
world as the bearer of intrinsic meanings to which we must conform was supplanted by the notion that the only orders we must acknowledge are those we construct for ourselves. The social imaginary no longer envisioned an interdependent system working in concert but a dispersal of atomistic individuals responsible only to themselves and only contingently responsive to those around them. This new model of the human being came to be shared across wide spectrum of early modern philosophers (notably, Descartes, Locke, and Kant) and eventually solidified in what Taylor calls the “buffered self.” The buffered self is assertive, rationalistic and stakes a claim to autarky that shuts down its experience of intimacy even in relation to its own bodily passions (a point Taylor drives home with copious quotation from Norbert Elias’s history of manners).

In describing this more isolated and self-possessed model of human being Taylor does not want to deny the gains it has brought: “A sense of power, of capacity, of being able to order our world and ourselves.” Insofar as it is a self-conception connected with “reason and science” its rise was accompanied by “great gains in knowledge and understanding.” But it has also encouraged a somewhat less palatable feeling of “invulnerability”:

Living in a disenchanted world, the buffered self is no longer open, vulnerable to a world of spirits and forces which cross the boundary of the mind, indeed, negate the very idea of there being a secure boundary. The fears, anxieties, even terrors that belong to the porous self are behind it. This sense of self-possession, of a secure inner mental realm, is all the stronger, if in addition to disenchaining the world, we have also taken the anthropocentric turn and no longer even draw upon the power of God.

For the first time the very idea of one’s dependence upon a transcendent or non-human order came to seem potentially dispensable. The way was now clear for the appearance of an “exclusive humanism” that no longer felt the urgency of an appeal to transcendence. The secular age was born.

THE IMMANENT FRAME

Much of the remainder of Taylor’s book—approximately half of its nearly 800 pages of text—consists in a critical description of the secular world as

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38 SA, 127.
39 SA, 301.
we experience it today in modern (Western) Europe and North America. But here the argument begins to exhibit a host of complications. The breakdown of the holistic yet differentiated pre-modern religious society did not necessarily mean that everyone sloughed off their faith to become buffered or atomistic selves. Instead, when the single framework began to unravel we witnessed what Taylor calls the “nova effect.” The possible strands of religious and non-religious satisfaction multiplied and trailed off in dozens of rival directions. Part of what gave rise to this multiplicity was the simple fact that no one answer any longer seemed inevitable. More dramatic still, the social imaginary no longer supported the earlier experience of a unified and sacred cosmos. The background or taken-for-granted interpretation that now structures our lives is remarkably different from what it was in the pre-modern world. Whatever our religious convictions, we have all tacitly consented to the disenchantment-narrative according to which there has been a rupture between God and nature. From this modern perspective it is at least possible to describe the cosmos in wholly immanent terms and without reference to a non-human or transcendent source of meaning. In this sense we all live today with a default interpretation of the world that Taylor calls “the immanent frame.” His summary of this experience sounds ominous indeed:

It is the sense of an absence; it is the sense that all order, all meaning comes from us. We encounter no echo outside. In the world read this way, as so many of our contemporaries live it, the natural/supernatural distinction is no mere intellectual abstraction. A race of humans has arisen which has managed to experience its world entirely as immanent. In some respects we may judge this achievement a victory for darkness, but it is a remarkable achievement nonetheless.40

It is no small irony that this passage seems so reminiscent of Nietzsche, who warned of a coming race of stunted humans he called “the last men.” The difference is that Taylor’s last men are creatures of pure immanence, and the world they inhabit is the unjoyful world in which God may be dead and meaning comes only from us. Whether this is a fair sketch of the modern condition is a question I will return to momentarily. For now let us accept Taylor’s suggestion that the immanent frame is haunted by the feeling of the transcendence it has rejected. It leaves behind a trace of malaise, the

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40 SA, 376.
sense that something is missing even if one is not entirely sure what that something is.

What solace is there for our current discontent? Some believers have tried to carry on with their traditions as if nothing had happened. But the very fact that there now exists a variety of denominations often injects religious traditionalism with a strain of militancy. Already in the nineteenth century, conservatives began to articulate a “neo-Durkheimian” or functionalist interpretation of religion as something considered absolutely necessary for obedience and social peace. Characteristically, Taylor’s tone becomes most lacerating only when he describes people who embrace this combination of religion and political reaction. But these were only few amongst the wide range of options available today. A growing number of people, more plentiful, perhaps, in Europe than in North America, have seized upon the option of exclusive humanism. And on Taylor’s view such people often articulate a longing for transcendence difficult to accommodate within the confines of an exclusively humanist perspective. Romantics complement the immanent frame by finding some analogue of transcendence in the sublimity of nature. Others look to the “subtler” languages of art and music. Perhaps most powerful of all in the modern world are forms of nationalism that Taylor calls “lesser modes” or “substitutes for eternity”: “One can make the eternal be the clan, the tribe, the society, the way of life.” Whatever the recourse, the very fact that one is seeking a kind of eternity bears witness to our modern sense that something has been lost, a feeling that on Taylor’s view seems to accompany the immanent frame like a shadow. The problem with all these solutions in Taylor’s opinion is that they offer merely an ersatz transcendence: “the mystery, the depth, the profoundly moving, can be, for all we know, entirely anthropological. Atheists, humanists cling on to this, as they go to concerts, operas, read great literature. So one can complement an ethics and a scientific anthropology which remain very reductive and flat.” Taylor is being quite candid when he describes any recourse as a “substitute.” His conclusion seems to be that such a recourse can never be entirely successful since the sought-after transcendence is not actually God.

But there is an alternative. Taylor is convinced that notwithstanding the strength of the immanent frame it remains possible to hold ourselves open to authentic transcendence. Faith of a genuine sort, not a substitutive faith or a New Age religion of human potential, remains a very real option:

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41 SA, 721.
42 SA, 356.
The immanent order can thus slough off the transcendent. But it doesn’t necessarily do so. What I have been describing as the immanent frame is common to all of us in the modern West, or at least that is what I am trying to portray. Some of us want to live it as open to something beyond; some live it as closed. It is something which permits closure, without demanding it.\(^{43}\)

This seems a surprising conclusion especially when it appears at the very end of an historical narrative whose chief purpose was to convince us that the whole societal infrastructure of traditional religious life has irrevocably collapsed. To appreciate the force of Taylor’s alternative it is therefore important to understand what he is not saying. He is not saying that everyone will remain open to transcendence, nor does he imagine that all of us will feel it to be necessary. He recognizes that many will simply deny anything has been lost. Others will insist that the experience of purely human flourishing is more than sufficient. Bolder exponents of exclusive humanism (such as Nietzsche) will rebel against the call for transcendence, which they will disparage as a symptom of our fear at the fact our own finitude and vulnerability.\(^{44}\) Exclusive humanists of this variety may try to salvage a non-religious experience of “internal transcendence” (as Martha Nussbaum proposes). Taylor finds this perspective worth consideration but he thinks it has closed itself off from an experience of the beyond. While humanists may dismiss religious believers as “closed-minded,” Taylor (with rhetorical aplomb) turns the complaint against them:

Exclusive humanism closes the transcendent window, as though there were nothing beyond. More, as though it weren’t an irrepressible need of the human heart to open that window, and first look, then go beyond. As though feeling this need were the result of a mistake, an erroneous world-view, bad conditioning, or worse, some pathology.\(^{45}\)

Furthermore, Taylor warns, exclusive humanists are standing on a slippery slope: “From the religious perspective,” he writes, “the problem is the opposite.” Transcendence is not an expression of hatred at the world or an evasion of all-too-human flourishing. Rather, even granting its sometimes

\(^{43}\) SA, 544.  
\(^{44}\) SA, 625–27.  
\(^{45}\) SA, 638.
benevolent intentions, the denial of transcendence is “bound to lead to a crumbling and eventual breakdown of all moral standards. First, secular humanism, and then eventually its pieties and values come under challenge. And in the end nihilism.” If one denies transcendence the result will be anti-humanist excrescences such as Fascism or Bolshevism, symptoms of a fascination with violence unchecked by any moral ends. Hence the apparent stalemate: “Two radically different perspectives on the human condition. Who is right?” Here is Taylor’s answer:

Well, who can make more sense of the life all of us are living? Seen from this angle, the very existence of modern anti-humanism seems to tell against exclusive humanism. If the transcendental view is right, then human beings have an ineradicable bent to respond to something beyond life. Denying this stifles.

Because exclusive humanists cannot appeal to something beyond the simple ideal of human flourishing, they have little defense against anti-humanists who therefore represent the cruel culmination of the exclusive-humanist perspective. And even when anti-humanism is not an imminent danger the human longing for transcendence of the human is a fact, and it is one that all of us who live in the immanent frame should not deny.

But this is hardly a knockdown argument. Part of the problem is Taylor’s failure to acknowledge rival accounts of political “anti-humanism.” While some may agree that Fascism and Bolshevism represented an irreligious denial of transcendence, others have discerned in these movements a modernist spirit of “political theology.” On this latter view, the celebration of the people or the collective takes on a sacral character not because genuine religion has been abandoned but only because its energies remain so powerfully alive. But if this interpretation is correct, the anti-humanist

46 SA, 638.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
threat comes not from an intensified tradition of humanist self-assertion but from the tradition of religion itself.

A second problem is that Taylor seems not to recognize that “exclusive humanism” may sometimes nourish not the arrogance of Nietzschean self-assertion but rather a deepened sense of human vulnerability. Taylor supposes that when religious conceptions of the self yield to purely naturalistic ones we are on our way toward an unreflective hedonism or cults of bodily power. This is the premise behind his account of the rise of the “buffered self.” But an important counter-narrative would suggest that the loss of the soul awakened human beings to a richer sense of their own animal fragility. To conceive of oneself as a purely material being of flesh and bone is to understand oneself as more porous to one’s surroundings, not less so, since one is metaphysically of the same substance as the world. A soul, no matter how penetrable to spirits and demons, would seem to proffer a kind of refuge from sickness and death that a physical body cannot. Naturalism has its own humility.

One reason Taylor may not appreciate this possibility as deeply as he should has to do with the character of his own philosophical commitments. As a philosopher indebted to both existential phenomenology and hermeneutics Taylor has spent much of his career combating the errors of the dominant post-Cartesian epistemological tradition. Now one of the major flaws of that tradition in Taylor’s view it is that it conceives of the self as a disengaged agency: this self is understood as primarily mentalistic (e.g., Descartes’s *cogito* or Kant’s *transcendental apperception*) and its disengagement is such that it can take up a distanced and rational stance towards its own history, its emotions, even its own body. Taylor has spent much energy contesting the manifold distortions that attend this model. In *Sources of the Self* it appeared as Locke’s “punctual self,” and the “buffered” self that figures so prominently in *A Secular Age* is a variant of this idea, though here we are told far more about its unfortunate socio-historical consequences.50

Now one might agree that the disengagement-model continues to operate as a kind of prejudice within some spheres of contemporary philosophy. And one would be right to combat it in the just the way Taylor has. But here is the confusion: according to phenomenologists such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty whose perspectives Taylor has worked to defend, the disengagement-model should be rejected for the simple reason that it is

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50 See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, see especially ch. 9, 159–76.
wrong. *It simply doesn't capture what it is like to be a human being.* What is therefore so perplexing about *A Secular Age* is that Taylor seems to describe the disengagement-model as if it were the *actual* experience of modern selfhood when it is arguably only a prejudicial and inaccurate model common to a certain class of philosophers. This difficulty is not Taylor’s alone. It afflicts many historians of philosophy, from Hegel to Heidegger, who interweave philosophical and socio-political narration as if reigning philosophical doctrines were also reliable markers for everyday life.

When one reflects upon the actual experience of modern selfhood as it has arisen in the wake of traditional religion one might wonder how the philosophical prejudice of the buffered self could ever have taken hold. Consider, for example, the comments from Freud’s 1925 essay, “The Resistances to Psychoanalysis.” 51 Freud tells us that one of the challenges confronting us as moderns is that we have been compelled to surrender the feeling of infantile security that was commonplace for our pre-modern ancestors. The breakdown of this feeling was due to what Freud calls the three successive “blows to human dignity.” The Copernican revolution dislodged us from our central station in a divinely ordered cosmos. The Darwinian revolution uprooted us from our privileged seats as chosen by God for dominion over His creation. And the psychoanalytic revolution upended our last vestiges of self-confidence with the suggestion that we do not even enjoy sovereign control over our own thoughts. Freud concluded that if his theory met with violent resistance this was partly because it was the culminating step in modernity’s assault on our erstwhile feelings of divine protection and entitlement. Now one needn’t think that Freud was necessarily right about psychoanalysis in particular. But his historical summary of the deepened experience of humiliation and decentering that accompanied the loss of axiomatic religion may offer an important corrective to Taylor’s claim that this loss only inflated our feelings of self-possession. Taylor seems to think that traditional theism was the sole bulwark against human self-aggrandizement. But is it truly inconceivable that with the rise of thoroughgoing naturalism one might find oneself moved to a keener modesty or even something like gratitude for what nature itself has given? At the very least, it seems, Taylor’s image of a potentially invulnerable self tells only part of the story. 52

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52 Consider, for instance, Michael Sandel’s recent effort to defend an ethic of “giftedness,” without necessarily appealing to a divine “giver” who is the source of nature’s unexpected
THE POSSIBILITY OF TRANSCENDENCE

Perhaps the greatest perplexity of Taylor’s book is its bold-yet-paradoxical conviction that even within the immanent frame some of us will nonetheless manage to remain open to an experience of genuinely religious transcendence. What is surprising about this idea is that it seems to conflict with Taylor’s own description of what it is like to be modern: if to be modern is to live within an immanent frame then how would a transcendent God show up at all? The difficulty here derives from the concept of a background itself, according to which our very experience of what there is was said to be premised upon a shared framework of tacit or taken-for-granted beliefs. The background is what gives us our ontology. And Taylor’s narrative was meant to demonstrate that the background changed over time: the background of traditional society permitted God to show up in a complicated way as both transcendent to our world yet also immanent within it. For the Christian God was “out there” yet also “in here,” both Father and Son; both celestial and embodied in a manifold of social practices and institutions from the Holy See to the parish priest. Thanks to the background our pre-modern ancestors felt their social bonds to be charged with sacred meaning. But on Taylor’s account the background understanding of the modern world is different, since it is one that tells us that what there is will show up as immanent. How, then, does a modern ontology of immanence permit transcendence to shine through?

Taylor’s way around this seeming paradox is to relax the ontological primacy of the background. The immanent order “can slough off the transcendent” although “it doesn’t necessarily do so.” He grants that the immanent frame is “common to all of us in the modern West.” But he insists the immanent frame can be spun in different ways: it is “something which permits closure, without demanding it” (my emphasis in both sentences).

This stipulation is rather surprising since it suggests that transcendence is a transhistorical constant, an experience which is still accessible (at least for some of us) notwithstanding the flattening-out of our social imaginary. But it is hard to see why this would be so. For it is a basic premise of Taylor’s historical narrative that the background has changed over time. And a transformation in the background means a transformation in the sorts of entities that can show up. But one implication is that such a trans-

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53 SA, 544.
formation should also change *us*. And, indeed, Taylor thinks it *has* changed us in profound (and sometimes unfortunate) ways. The point of his narrative is to show us how much the place of religion has been relativized into a mere option thanks to the many-sided transformation of our social existence. But he will not let this narrative change us entirely: he urges us to see that “human beings have an ineradicable bent to respond to something beyond life.” But if this bent is truly ineradicable then the historical transformation of the background seems much less profound in its consequences than Taylor himself implies. History may have changed many things; the longing for transcendence persists.

And what of the Transcendent *itself*? If we are to take seriously Taylor’s premise that a change in the background has brought forth new and unprecedented options for human life, including the life of faith, then we should also consider the possibility that the great transformation from the pre-modern religious world to our own world of immanent modernity may also have changed our conception of the sacred itself. Taylor seems to admit this possibility throughout his book, but only when he wants to explain how the sacred can be misunderstood (by Calvinists, Jansenists, Deists, nineteenth-century nationalists, and so forth, all of whom he sees as abandoning certain vital features that should ideally accompany a satisfying religious life). For Taylor, the sacred is historically invariant, *always and only* God. Other experiences (for example, a Romantic’s experience of the natural sublime, or a concertgoer’s experience of a Beethoven symphony) do not count in his view as *actual* transcendence since they are ultimately reducible to an exclusive humanism. But this is to pre-decide which are to be valid candidates for sacred experience.

The problem is that the basic distinction—between transcendence and immanence—is freighted with a great number of metaphysical prejudices that may obstruct us from recognizing other ways to experience the sacred in the modern world. What room, for example, can be made here for Spinoza’s conception of the divine as wholly immanent to nature (*Deus sive Natura*)? For Taylor Spinoza belongs squarely within the tradition of Deism, whose “impersonal” image of God laid the grounding for the modern natural-scientific image of nature as an unresponsive and disenchanted causal order. Lost in this characterization is the possibility that the sacred might actually show up within a framework of thoroughgoing immanence. Spinoza, said Novalis, was “der Gottvertrunkene Mann” (the God-intoxicated

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54 SA, 280–81.
man). For Taylor, however, the possibility of a wholly immanent pantheism was left behind long ago and can no longer hold a coherent place in our lives. But perhaps this is only because his own metaphysical constraints compel him to disregard any such cases that conflict with his *a priori* conviction that the title of the sacred belongs to monotheistic transcendence alone.

And what of aesthetics? Taylor grants that many moderns will seek out something *like* the sacred by opening themselves to great works of art. But he is reluctant to admit that such examples could count as genuine transcendence, since an experience of aesthetic transfiguration, no matter how profound, does not require our surpassing the natural-human matrix. The wonder we feel might well be nothing but another form of immanence: the thrill of sensory fulfillment, an admiration at the artist’s technique, and so forth. Taylor grants some exceptions. But it is revealing that when he acknowledges those rare cases of modern music and literature that permit feelings of genuine transcendence he names only artists known for their religious inspiration, e.g., the French Catholic modernist composer Olivier Messiaen, and the poet T. S. Eliot, a convert to Anglicanism.\(^55\) Taylor also mentions Beethoven, but his example is the *Missa Solemnis*, which borrows its structures from the Latin Mass. Apparently, Taylor wants his transcendence in traditionally religious form. Cases of “absolute music,” that is, musical compositions without a program or object, such as Beethoven’s late string quartets, are consigned to the story of “disembedding.”\(^56\)

One reason to resist this verdict is that it seems unresponsive to the actual phenomenology of aesthetic experience. What does it mean when a modern-but-non-religious person claims to be “moved” by a work of art? Taylor admits it *might* be a moment of transcendence (though this would seem to depend in part on the religious affiliation of the artist). But the experience *itself* provides no guarantee of this meaning. What is confusing here is that to find out whether the experience counts as transcendence or not, it is apparently necessary to go beyond the experience itself (a violation of phenomenological method). Or does Taylor believe that Bede Griffiths’s epiphany somehow *feels* more transcendent than my own epiphany before a Cézanne? Both are experiences of great plenitude and beauty. But why does the first seem to count as necessarily transcendent while the other does not? It is tempting to ask whether this closing down of other possibilities is compatible with the openness Taylor himself recommends.

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\(^55\) *SA*, 360.  
\(^56\) *SA*, 355–56.
What I am trying to suggest is that Taylor’s richly-textured history of the background should also have awakened him to the (possibly distressing) thought that there are many modes of the sacred and many kinds of wonder, and that the Christian religion is merely one historical deposit of sacred experience amongst many. It is neither the first nor does it seem likely that it will be the last. Admittedly, the notion that our experience of the sacred could be historically variable may seem paradoxical. Yet once we have committed ourselves to a full-blown historical ontology it follows as a matter of course: the character of the sacred must change as the background changes, and from this iron rule nothing can claim exemption—not even God. It is this principle that makes historical ontology especially worrisome to a conventional monotheist, whether Christian, Muslim, or Jew: for several millennia many people in the West have subscribed to traditions according to which the sacred shows itself as some kind of transcendent mega-entity, a super-subject or Presence. (Heidegger termed these traditions “onto-theological.”) But that does not mean that this is what sacred experience must always be like. Indeed, we might consider whether this version of sacred experience already represents a certain breakdown in the holistic experience of sacred life. Perhaps the “onto-theological” experience of sacred transcendence is a symptom of disenchantment, not a refuge from it.

The French social theorist Marcel Gauchet has tried to integrate this historicist insight into his own political history of religion.57 His project represents an unusual combination of Durkheim and Weber: a functionalist conception of religion as the sacral bond of society volatilized by an historical narrative that seeks to explain how that bond mutated into the modern ideal of political freedom. This inquiry brings him to the striking conclusion that the rise of monotheism was itself the very first phase in the decay of religion. In the immanent religions of primitive societies, the instituting power of society was fully removed from human control, thus imposing a form of static equality on the collective. Paradoxically, this radical dispossession began to collapse when the monotheistic revolutions of the Axial age broke free of this immanence to imagine a divinity transcendent to the world. Intersecting with new dynamics created by the birth of states, the rise of transcendence fueled what Gauchet calls the “religious exit from religion,” since it was the initial step by which humanity desacralized its understanding of its own social and terrestrial condition and gained greater

freedom over its fate. Now, if Gauchet is right, then Christianity (and monotheism more generally) is not the eternal form of religion at all, and transcendence itself is but one phase in the social history of the sacred. As Simone Weil suggested, the highest form of prayer might not even require an object.58

Understandably, Taylor does not wish to take this last step into the turbulent waters of ontological historicism.59 Notwithstanding all of the changes history has wrought Taylor seems determined to leave the very object of transcendence intact. For what is genuinely sacred for Taylor can only be transcendent and can only be God. Anything else, he suggests would be “like Hamlet without the Prince.”60 At various points in A Secular Age there are signs that he would like to adopt a more generous and genuinely pluralistic perspective on the varieties of sacred experience. But it is ultimately a non-historicist and non-pluralist model of the sacred that serves as the polestar for Taylor’s narrative. And it not difficult to see why: to historicize the sacred would be to relativize God as merely one manifestation of the sacred in history. Worse still, it would subordinate Him to time. Taylor would readily grant that God has a metaphysical history, since a divine narrative is a characteristic of monotheism in general and of Christianity in particular. But he appears to resist an ontological historicization that would rob the divine of its singularity as the sole object of authentic transcendence. This resistance, one could say, marks the limit-point of a pluralistic historical ontology, beyond which a traditional monotheist cannot pass if he wishes to retain his faith. Taylor holds instead to the hard nugget of conviction that God is still there, and that He is still what He has always been, even if His appearance is now, perhaps, more rare and more miraculous. The striking conclusion of this brilliant yet perplexing history is that when it comes to the most ultimate matters history may not matter at all.

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60 Taylor, foreword to Gauchet, Disenchantment, xv.